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Hearing the Shofar with Korah's Children

Ethan Schwartz is Assistant Professor of Hebrew Bible at Villanova University.

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Introduction

The Yamim Nora'im are an optical illusion. When you try to look at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur separately, they seem like one long holiday. Their themes and liturgies blur together. Yet when you start looking at them *that* way, they seem like two distinct holidays after all. It is hardly obvious how the lofty celebration of divine kingship on Rosh Hashanah fits with the humble preoccupation with human sinfulness on Yom Kippur.

The *shofar*, the most iconic symbol of these momentous days, embodies this complexity. Consider how the psalm at the heart of the Rosh Hashanah *shofar* service describes it:

> **Tehillim 47:6**
> God ascends on trumpet blasts;
> Hashem, on the call of the *shofar*.

In this psalm, the *shofar* announces Hashem's exalted coronation. The sound of the blasts is invigorating, directing our attention upward. There is no mention of *teshuvah*. Now consider

the Rambam's famous account of the *shofar*'s function:

> **Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:4**
>
> Although blowing the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah is a scriptural decree, it has a deeper meaning: "Wake up from your sleep, sleepy ones! Arise from your drowsiness, drowsy ones! Search out your deeds, do *teshuvah*, and remember your Creator!"

For the Rambam, the *shofar* responds to human lowliness. The sound of the blasts is piercing, directing our attention inward. There is no mention of kingship.

In this essay, I offer an account of the relationship between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, between kingship and *teshuvah*, that centers on someone unexpected: Korah—the infamous Levite who leads an ill-fated rebellion against Moshe and Aharon (Bemidbar 16). By the time Rosh Hashanah arrives, most Jews probably have not thought about Korah since they last read the *parashah* that bears his name and tells his unhappy story. However, he shows up right at the beginning of the *shofar* service. It is so quick that, if you blink, you might miss it:

> **Tehillim 47:1**
>
> For the leader; a psalm of Korah's children.

The coronation psalm is ascribed to Korah's children. It is a strange choice: while confirming Hashem's kingship, we quote the descendants of Benei Yisrael's greatest insurrectionist.

One could argue that this psalm was chosen simply for its thematic relevance; the ascription is incidental. However, I do not find this explanation satisfying. There is, after all, a psalm with no connection to Korah that also links kingship with the *shofar*:

> **Tehillim 98:6**
>
> With trumpets and with the *shofar*'s call,
> make noise before King Hashem!

Familiar from Kabbalat Shabbat, this psalm invites creation itself to praise Hashem. Creation is, of course, another central theme of Rosh Hashanah, as the Rambam suggests. The psalm therefore could have provided an elegant transition to Musaf *piyyutim* such as Ha-Yom Harat Olam. Yet the liturgy declines this option.

Accordingly, I want to suggest that our experience of this pivotal liturgical moment may be enriched if we consider the possibility that there is a specific, substantive reason for invoking Korah's children, of all people, in this context. The midrashic tradition contains a lively, extensive debate about whether Korah's children joined their father's rebellion, how they were punished if they did, and whether they did *teshuvah* for it. In other words, these heralds of the theme of Rosh Hashanah are the subjects of a story about the theme of Yom Kippur. I trace two divergent interpretive trends in the debate and then offer two corresponding readings of the *shofar* service.

Hearing the *shofar* with Korah's children activates its function as a potent nexus of the Yamim Nora'im as a whole.

What Happened to Korah's Children?

Even apart from the Yamim Nora'im, Korah's children have long presented an exegetical puzzle. The confusion begins in the Torah itself. Later in Bemidbar, in Parashat Pinhas—a few parshiyot after the account of the coup—a genealogy of the tribe of Reuven mentions Korah's coconspirators, Datan and Aviram, saying:

> **Bemidbar 26:9–10**
> And the children of Eliav: Nemuel, Datan, and Aviram. These are the same Datan and Aviram, men of the assembly, who incited against Moshe and Aharon in Korah's assembly, when they incited against Hashem. The earth opened up and swallowed them and Korah, when the congregation died when the fire consumed the two hundred fifty men—and they became a sign.

This is hardly news to anyone who paid attention during Parashat Korah; the goal here seems to be simply to connect the genealogy with a story that the readers already know. However, the Torah then quickly issues the following clarification:

> **Bemidbar 26:11**
> But Korah's children did not die.

This is noteworthy, as it provides a detail that Parashat Korah never mentions. In fact, the wording in the parashah might appear to suggest precisely the opposite:

> **Bemidbar 16:32**
> The earth opened its mouth and swallowed [Datan and Aviram] and their families—plus all of Korah's people—and all the property.

In fairness, the phrase "Korah's people" is ambiguous. It could refer only to his associates, not to his children.[1] However, given the reference to the other rebels' families, one could reasonably conclude that Korah's children died too. Later, in Parashat Pinhas, the Torah goes out of its way to emphasize that this is not the case.

As it turns out, there is a good reason that it does so. If we were to continue reading Tanakh under the assumption that Korah's line had ended, we would be in for a shock: eleven psalms, including the one from the shofar service—Tehillim 42; 44–49; 84–85; 87–88—are ascribed to Korah's children. Clearly, they survived and went on to do what the Levi'im were famous for: they sang songs of praise to Hashem. Yet this raises another question: Why are the descendants of Benei Yisrael's most infamous rebel playing such

[1] So the Bekhor Shor on Bemidbar 26:11.

an honored role? With each additional piece of information, Korah's children only become more mysterious.

Interpretation #1:
Korah's Children Went to Gehinnom

Speaking historically, the contradictory data about Korah's children can be read as the results of ancient disagreements as to whether Levi'im such as Korah were full priests on the level of Aharon and his sons.[2] However, if we approach the Tanakh as an internally consistent whole, we can see the exegetical complexities surrounding Korah's children as a reflection of the theological complexities surrounding sin. One starting point for exploring these complexities is an ominous statement about Korah in the Mishnah:

> **Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:3**
> Korah's assembly is not destined to arise [in the resurrection].

This is part of a list of exceptions to the general rule that all Jews have a share in the world to come. Elaborating on why this ignominious list features Korah and his associates, the Bavli relates a wild tale that brings Korah's children into the picture:

> **Bavli Sanhedrin 110a**
> "But Korah's children did not die." It is recited: They said in the name of Rabbeinu: A place was fortified for them in Gehinnom, and there they sat and sang. Rabah bar bar Hanah said: One time I was on the road and a traveling merchant said to me, "Come—I'll show you [the people] of Korah who were swallowed up." So I went and saw two fissures with smoke coming out of them. [The merchant] took a woollen fleece, moistened it, placed it on the tip of his spear, and passed it over [the fissures]. It was sizzling [from the heat]! He said to me, "Listen—what do you hear?" I listened. [Voices in the fissure] were saying, "Moshe and his Torah are true—and they [the others, i.e., we ourselves] are liars."[3]

The Torah's notice that Korah's children survived might suggest an exemption from the Mishnah's notice that Korah's associates are damned.

[2] For an overview, see Ethan Schwartz, "No, Korah Is Not the Hero," *Jewschool*, June 9, 2021, https://jewschool.com/no-korah-is-not-the-hero-173243.

[3] A much briefer parallel appears in Bavli Megillah 14a.

However, the Bavli harmonizes them. It claims that while Korah's children indeed survived, they did not escape perdition.[4] Hashem spares them by relegating them to a special place in hell.

Why would Hashem do this? The psalms, originally part of the exegetical problem, now become the solution. We saw that, when the Torah recalls Korah's coup, the upshot is that the rebels became a "sign." The original story clarifies what this means:

> **Bemidbar 17:5**
>
> [The remains from the conflagration are] a reminder for Benei Yisrael: An outsider—i.e., one not descended from Aharon—is not to approach to offer incense before Hashem, so as not to become like Korah and his assembly, just as Hashem said to him through Moshe.[5]

Korah emerged as a cautionary tale for anyone who would dare to challenge Hashem and/or Hashem's legitimate representatives. The Bavli explains how Korah's children also played this function even though they did not die. Hashem keeps them alive only to make an "example" of them in the negative, punitive sense. Their public role as psalm-singers actualizes this function. Sitting in Gehinnom and singing about Moshe's truth and their own falsehood, they perpetually bear witness to their transgression.

Interpretation #1 and the *Shofar* Service: Korah's Children as a Negative Model to Be Avoided

It is not difficult to read this punitive account of Korah's children into their words during the *shofar* service: the psalm is an ironic self-indictment, affirming the kingship that they once challenged. This fits well with a prominent theological dimension of Rosh Hashanah: the cosmic battle between good and evil. The liturgy puts it memorably:

> **Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur**
>
> And every last trace of evil will go up like smoke when You remove the dominion of insolence from the earth.[6]

This apocalyptic dualism is reflected in the starkest

[4] Interestingly, the *aggadah*'s depiction of subterranean fire combines the two modes of destruction that unfold separately in the biblical story: the earthquake (Bemidbar 16:31–34) and the fire (Bemidbar 16:35). The use of the word *qitra* for "smoke" is also elegant because Korah's contest with Aharon is decided by offering incense (*qetoret*).

[5] On the connection with the sign in Bemidbar 26:10, see Rashi and Ibn Ezra there.

[6] Citations of the liturgy follow the Ashkenazi *nusah*.

of Rosh Hashanah's alternative titles: "Judgment Day." As good and evil take their respective stands, Hashem's kingship—indeed, the world itself—hangs in the balance. Whose side are we on?

Korah's children, singing from Gehinnom, underscore the gravity of our answer. They represent the evil, chaotic forces that would challenge Hashem's just order.[7] This, the late R. Rachel Cowan argued, is why the Torah emphasizes that they did not die: "We certainly see them today: cynical political, religious, and communal leaders cloaking self-interest in the language of democracy, nationalism, or God."[8] When we recite their psalm during the *shofar* service, perhaps the liturgy is reminding us of what happens to those who question Hashem's reign. Perhaps we are meant to hear the song as if it were emanating faintly from one of those burning fissures in the ground.

Yet if this punitive interpretation coheres with a key dimension of Rosh Hashanah, it also misses a key dimension of Yom Kippur. The former makes it seem as if the enemies of Hashem's kingship are all "out there." The latter, however, confronts us with the fact that the evil that will one day go up like smoke comes, in good measure, from *us*. We ourselves are the enemies of divine sovereignty:

> **Selihot for Yamim Nora'im**
>
> We have strayed from Your commandments and Your good laws, and it has gotten us nothing. You are justified in everything that befalls us, for You have acted faithfully and we have done evil.

This is not to say that everyone has, like Korah, directly rebelled against Hashem's rule. Rather, *all* transgression inherently undermines Hashem's vision for an ordered, just world.

The Yom Kippur liturgy is brutally realistic about human inadequacy. At the same time, however, it stubbornly maintains hope and resists resignation. The God of Yom Kippur is the God about whom Unetanneh Tokef, paraphrasing Yehezkel, declares:

> **Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur**
>
> For You take no pleasure in the death of those who die [for their sins] but rather in their doing *teshuvah* from their [present] course and living.[9]

[7] Note the connection between the incineration of Korah's group and the Mahzor's statement that evil is destined to "go up like smoke."

[8] Rachel Cowan, "Contemporary Reflection [on Parashat Korah]," in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, ed. Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea L. Weiss (URJ Press, 2008), 911–12, here 911; see also Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Lishmah and Not Lishmah" (Part 1), in *Faith, History, and Values: Essays and Lectures* (Hebrew; Akademon, 2002), 25–45, here 42.

[9] The original *pasuk* is Yehezkel 33:11; see also Yehezkel 18:23, 32. All three *pesukim* are quoted in Ne'ilah.

Even though—or, perhaps, precisely because—we have transgressed, we have a crucial role to play in defeating evil and affirming Hashem's reign: doing *teshuvah*.

Hazal are able to say this because they internalize the moral dualism that characterizes Rosh Hashanah. Every person's soul is a front in the cosmic war between good and evil—between our best and worst aspects, or, in Hazal's terminology, between our *yetzer ha-tov* and *yetzer ha-ra*. R. Cowan, however, recasts it as "an ongoing conflict between an 'inner Moses' and an 'inner Korah'—between humility and arrogance, between selflessness and selfishness. And until we can hear the difference between those two voices, our actions will not be effective in countering the power of the Korahs at large in the world."[10] In this reading, we invoke Korah's children in the *shofar* service to set ourselves on notice. Their negative example helps us to recognize the seditious forces in our own souls and to do *teshuvah* accordingly. If we do so, then we, unlike them, are not doomed to a special place in hell.

Interpretation #2:
Korah's Children Did *Teshuvah*

Internalizing the negative example of Korah's children offers one way to think about how coronation and *teshuvah* intersect on the Yamim Nora'im. However, the conceptual basis for this move—namely, the Bavli's punitive reading—is not the only possible explanation of these enigmatic characters. A *midrash* in the Tanhuma goes in a very different direction:

> **Midrash Tanhuma Korah 5**
>
> [Korah] thought, "Could such greatness [as a respected line of Levi'im] really come from me if I myself am to perish?" But he did not foresee accurately, for his children had done *teshuvah* and abstained from [the rebellion].

Korah knows that his descendants will become important, holy servants of Hashem. This destiny empowers him to act with impunity because he assumes that it must constitute their continuation of his own righteousness. What he fails to consider is that it might constitute their *teshuvah* from his own wickedness.

Later commentators endeavored to square this with the claim that Hashem sent Korah's children to Gehinnom. For instance, Rashi explains:

> **Rashi on Bemidbar 26:11**
>
> They were involved in the plot initially, but during the rebellion they had thoughts of *teshuvah* in

[10] Cowan, "Contemporary Reflection," 911.

their hearts. This is why a high place was fortified for them in Gehinnom and they sat there.[11]

Rashi's synthesis, however, has its own ambiguities. Is he making a positive point—that the *teshuvah* of Korah's children was powerful enough to mitigate the consequences of their sin? Or is he making a negative point—that their *teshuvah* was *not* powerful enough to undo those consequences fully? The Siftei Hakhamim [12] adopts the positive reading. Rashi, he argues, is using the Tanhuma to soften the Bavli.

Siftei Hakhamim on Bemidbar 26:11

The Holy Blessed One established a high place for them so that they would not descend too deep into Gehinnom and therefore not die.

A subterranean perch is more hospitable and respectable than the true depths of hell. Because Korah's children did *teshuvah*, Hashem spared them the worst possible fate. The Maharal, [13] however, is more skeptical. He takes Rashi to be making the negative point:

Gur Aryeh on Bemidbar 26:11

Why does it say, "But Korah's children did not die," not, "But Korah's children lived"? It means that while they indeed did not die, they also did not really live. "They had thoughts of *teshuvah* in their hearts"—but it was not complete *teshuvah*. As such, they neither lived nor died, but "a high place was fortified for them in Gehinnom and they sat there."

On this reading, Rashi is subordinating the Tanhuma's positivity to the Bavli's condemnation. If the *teshuvah* of Korah's children had been *authentic*, the Maharal suggests, then perhaps they would have escaped altogether.

These syntheses are creative and compelling. However, I would suggest that there is also value in letting the Bavli and Tanhuma stand in their divergence. Like the Bavli, the Tanhuma follows the Torah's lead in making Korah's children an example. Unlike the Bavli, however, the Tanhuma makes them a *positive* example. Once again, Hazal turn the psalms ascribed to Korah's children into

[11] We may infer that the Tanhuma is the source of Rashi's reference to *teshuvah* because he cites it in asserting "[Korah's] children did *teshuvah*" on Bemidbar 16:7.

[12] A supercommentary on Rashi by R. Shabbetai Bass (Poland, 1641–1718).

[13] R. Yehudah Loew (Prague, c. 1524–1609), who also wrote a supercommentary on Rashi called Gur Aryeh.

the solution to their own exegetical problem. These are not the psalms of those who rebelled against Hashem. They are the psalms of those who did *teshuvah* for that rebellion.

Interpretation #2 and the *Shofar* Service: Korah's Children as a Positive Model to Be Emulated

One might object that crediting Korah's children with *teshuvah* is a contrived solution. Where is the textual evidence? This critique would limit the relevance of this interpretation for the *shofar* service. *Teshuvah* is hard work. Unless Korah's children demonstrate that hard work, they cannot provide a very meaningful model. However, their hard work is hiding in plain sight: in their psalms. It is not enough simply to acknowledge the sheer fact that Korah's offspring recited psalms. We need to examine the content of the psalms themselves.

If we turn to these psalms with the *shofar* service in mind, we see that our coronation psalm fits a broader profile of celebrating divine kingship. For example:

> **Tehillim 44:5**
> You are my king, O God;
> command victories for Jacob!

Here, Hashem is depicted as a mighty Warrior-King who personally leads Am Yisrael to victory in battle. This royal ideal is broadly attested in Tanakh and elsewhere in its ancient cultural context.[14] Another psalm in the collection declares:

> **Tehillim 84:4**
> Even the sparrow finds a
> home,
> the swallow, a nest in which
> to set her young,
> at Your altars, Hashem
> Tzeva'ot,
> My king, my God.

This poem activates a different biblical and ancient Near Eastern association with kings: their beneficent care for their subjects. Prowess in battle was not the only measure of royal strength. Powerful kings provided for their people.[15]

Yet alongside Hashem's kingship, the psalms of Korah's children also focus on something different: a pressing awareness of human lowliness and alienation from the divine king. The opening line of the whole collection is one of the most famous biblical expressions of these ideas:

> **Tehillim 42:1–3**
> For the leader; a *maskil* of Korah's children.
> Like a deer longing for watercourses,
> my very being longs for You, O God;

[14] See also, e.g., Tehillim 149.

[15] See also, e.g., Tehillim 72.

my very being thirsts for God, the living God.
When will I enter and look upon God's face?

By invoking thirst, the speaker vividly expresses their distance from Hashem as if it were a fundamental, physical deprivation. In contrast to the royal psalm, in which even birds find refuge in the divine King's palace, here the speaker can only wonder if they will ever experience that sacred space. Korah's children are also credited with the psalm traditionally recited in a Shivah home. It declares:

Tehillim 49:13
Human beings, so precious, cannot abide;
they are like the beasts that perish.

In language reminiscent of Kohelet, this poem confronts the futility of human life. Despite our pretenses to grandeur, we are far closer to the humblest of creatures than to the divine King.[16]

In the psalms ascribed to Korah's children, we find divine coronation alongside human humility—precisely the unintuitive combination that characterizes the Yamim Nora'im. This, I suggest, undergirds the role of Korah's children as models of *teshuvah* in the *shofar* service. A process of *teshuvah* fits well with their lowly psalms of contrition. Yet, given their transgression, a process of *teshuvah* also fits surprisingly well with their family's exalted psalms of coronation. The Rambam emphasizes that real *teshuvah* involves a concrete, public process of corrected action.[17] It therefore makes sense that, having grappled with their human limitations, Korah's children would devote their psalms to the issue on which their clan had so gravely erred.

For these reasons, we do not *need* to imagine Korah's children reciting the coronation psalm of the *shofar* service from Gehinnom. Instead, we can place his descendants exactly where Sefer Tehillim does: in the Beit ha-Mikdash, serving the God whom they now duly recognize as King. They merit this role not in spite of their family's transgression but in virtue of how they sought to correct it—in virtue of how they recognized and responded to the elements within themselves that were undermining Hashem's sovereignty. In this way, they model the radical, transformative power of the *teshuvah* to which the *shofar* calls us all.

Conclusion

On the Yamim Nora'im, it is easy to swing entirely toward either the cosmic drama of Rosh Hashanah or the personal introspection of Yom Kippur; it is easy to hear the *shofar* only as a herald of Hashem's kingship or only as a call to *teshuvah*. In

[16] Note the stark contrast with the accounts of humanity in Bereishit 1:27–30 and Tehillim 8, both of which employ ancient Near Eastern royal motifs.

[17] Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Teshuvah 2:1–5.

this essay, I have argued that the liturgy suggests a way to avoid this compartmentalization: hearing the *shofar* with Korah's children. It is no coincidence that we recite one of their psalms at Hashem's coronation. Their words are shaped by their personal experience with transgression.

The precise nature of that experience is, as we have seen, debatable. Some might hear the *shofar* and be haunted by the image of Korah's children paying for their sins in Gehinnom. Others might hear it and be inspired by the image of Korah's children doing *teshuvah*. Ultimately, we do not need to come down in favor of one interpretation over the other. Taken as a negative model, Korah's children underscore that evil is real and that actions have consequences. Taken as a positive model, Korah's children underscore that goodness is real and that actions do not permanently define us. Both messages have a role on the Yamim Nora'im.

When we perform the *shofar* service, Korah's children give us some of our tradition's most august words for affirming Hashem's kingship:

> **Tehillim 47:3**
>
> For Hashem Most High is awe-inspiring,
> the Great King over the whole earth.

But Korah's children also remind us that if we genuinely mean these words on Rosh Hashanah, then we must commit to *teshuvah* as we look ahead to Yom Kippur. That is what makes these words a reality; that is what truly makes Hashem King.

An Empty Place at the Jewish Table: Why Are Young Jews Dropping Out?

A freelancer in Forest Hills, Queens, Steve Lipman was a staff writer at the New York Jewish Week in 1983-2020.

If a Jewish version of the classic 1960's U.S. film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* were made today, many of my closest friends in the Orthodox community could suggest a new title: *Guess Who's* ***Not*** *Coming to Dinner?*

A Shabbat dinner, in other words.

And they could all suggest the same answer to that question: one of their sons or daughters.

Because there is an empty chair at my friends' Shabbat tables – emotionally, if not physically.

As we take pride in the growth of the *frum* community in recent decades, a result of the now-waning *b'aal teshuvah* movement that has expanded our ranks of shomeir Shabbat/kosher-keeping/daf yomi-studying/sheitel-wearing members, we risk overlooking a concurrent phenomenon: the number of young men and women in those Torah-observant families who are moving away from a life guided by *halakhah*. People who are following in the footsteps of earlier generations of Jews, who, upon reaching

adulthood, stepped away from normative Orthodox Jewish practice.

With no effort, I can count the grown sons and daughters of at least ten families – whom I count as my friends – who no longer consider themselves Orthodox. Name a family in my circles, and I can probably name a child who no longer keeps Shabbat, eats kosher, cares much about Israel, or identifies as Torah-observant. Sons and daughters who studied in Jewish day schools, attended yeshivot and seminaries in Eretz Israel, went to summer camps that were under Orthodox auspices, and participated in other traditional *emunah*-strengthening, *kehilah*-building activities. Children from Modern Orthodox and Haredi – Hasidic and Litvish – backgrounds who have disassociated themselves from Orthodox life as they reached adolescence, in substantive and symbolic ways.

And what is a more symbolic form of estrangement from Orthodox life than absence from a family's Shabbat table?[1]

A caveat: It's not just in my circle of friends. Statistical and anecdotal evidence tells the same story: even as many once-secular Jews are coming into the Orthodox fold and are starting Jewish families, many of their children are opting out. Some of us think it happens to *the other guy, to another family.* I don't have that luxury.

But…

… Don't *shrai gevalt* yet about our communal losses. While disheartening, the situation isn't nearly universal, or as widespread, as some discouraging statistics and a series of recent "off-the-*derekh*" (OTD) sociological studies, books, and memoirs would seem to indicate. It's not a massive desertion from the Orthodox ranks. For instance, Rabbi Avi Shafran, who as director of public affairs for Agudath Israel of America serves as a de facto spokesman for Haredi Jews in the United States, says in an interview with the author, "I know hundreds of Orthodox families, but only two or three that have a child who left Orthodox practice."

He is fortunate. Most of the families with whom he is familiar are presumably in his fervently Haredi circles.

Rabbi Shafran, in the same interview, says the OTD phenomenon has become very visible "due to the explosive growth in numbers of the [Orthodox] community" (i.e., the more Orthodox Jews there are, the more, according to actuarial reality, who are in a position to leave). And because of the

[1] Full disclosure: 1) A committed *ba'al teshuvah* for the majority of my 75 years, I, divorced for a long time, do not have children; my thoughts here are observations culled from the many Orthodox families I have befriended over the decades. 2) My experiences in the Orthodox community may be skewed by the type of people with whom I naturally associate – men and women, who, by Orthodox standards, are relatively open-minded and accepting, and are therefore likely to raise children who feel free to make their own lifestyle decisions and to reject what they see as unbending religious dogma.

increasing ubiquity of social media, which spread the dramatic "ex" stories, and which many observers blame for the growth in the number of people who question traditional Jewish beliefs (i.e., widely available access to information about the non-Orthodox world may make non-"religious" options seem attractive to people who were not exposed to such "heresy" in their first years of education. Folks in the ghetto never knew about secular literature, non-Jewish music, and other parts of "goyishe" culture).

On the other hand, Rabbi Marc Angel, a leader of the (Modern Orthodox) Open Orthodoxy movement, and founder of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, which treats Jewish tradition from a more-liberal perspective, says in an interview with the author, that while every "ex-" is a regrettable loss to the community, the fact that some losses are taking place is inevitable. "Of course, it is troubling to us when anyone chooses to leave" Orthodox belief and affiliation, he says, "but this phenomenon of leaving one's original religious community is not uncommon in America, and is probably equally or even more prevalent among Christian communities."

Adds Rabbi Angel, "Also, there is a counter-tendency – children raised 'Modern Orthodox' who then 'hareidize.'" – i.e., "flip out," as that pattern is often called. "It is increasingly difficult for 'moderates' to hold their own."

In other words, the tendency of some Jews to gravitate to one end of the observance-and-belief spectrum or the other (all or nothing), is the religious parallel of the current political reality in the U.S., Israel, and other countries – a growing number of men and women, especially in the United States, tending towards extremes, a belief backed up by a 2025 Pew Research Center survey, "Religious & Political identity in the US."

The Words We Use

First, the matter of language …

The term OTD is one of the milder ones that members of the still-Orthodox community apply to its members who have drifted or stepped away. The implication: *Our derekh*. Ergo, a person described as OTD is already convicted; he or she has left his or her community of birth, as well as the "proper" path. Other pejorative terms: Rebellious. Confused. Brainwashed. Unthinking. Heretic. *Apikores.* Slaves of the *yeitzer hara* (evil inclination). *Frei* (free of God-given obligations).

It's not what people in their circles call themselves. They have other more-clinical, less-judgmental terms: simply "ex," or "ex-Orthodox," or "XO," or "ex-Haredi," or "ex-Hasidic," or "*ba'alei teshuvah* in reverse." "On their own *derekh*," one mother suggests on the jewishmom.com website. Or plain "Jewish" – not wishing to identify themselves relative to what they *were,* rather to what they *are*, to the path they choose. Which is similar to many "humanistic" Jews, who prefer that description to "atheist," stressing what they *do* believe in (the primacy of logic and reasoning ability), instead of what they do not believe in (a

Supreme Deity).

And another point about language …

… How many *frum* Jews use the word "Orthodoxy" about their belief system? Not many.

While "Orthodox" has come to be an accepted label of the person or of the so-called branch of Judaism, "Orthodoxy" is a misleading description of one's approach to religion. It is a misnomer, demeaning to sincere believers. It's not a Jewish concept – there's probably no exact rendering of it in Hebrew or Yiddish. It means going along with prevailing practice – accepting a normal, established belief system, marching in lockstep. An unchallenging way of thinking or acting. It is a term, with roots in Christianity, which, according to the myjewishlearning.com website, came into common usage in the 18th century during the period of the Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) and the emergence of the Reform Judaism movement. The term, loosely used to describe the Orthodox "Torah true" community, denotes a corseted mindset of behavior. But being Orthodox is a matter of *emunah,* not of membership or affiliation or unthinking conformity. "Orthodoxy" is a limiting way of thinking; conveying a mindset that is contrary to the way of life of truly *yirat Shamayim* Jews, who are weaned on the talmudic give-and-take of *pilpul* – though such a culture of disputation "for the sake of Heaven" may not be apparent to outsiders, or to the insiders who bridle at the seeming restrictions.[2]

Back to the demographics. Consider the stats …

According to a 2013 Pew study, 52 percent of Jewish adults in the United States who were raised Orthodox were no longer Orthodox; and in another, more recent study, one-third of Jewish adults in the U.S. with Orthodox upbringings no longer affiliate with Orthodox Judaism or abide by traditional dos and don'ts of observant life.[3]

Numbers that give pause.

Other studies back up these findings. While demographers caution that a lack of long-term, longitudinal research leaves claims open to doubt, "ex-Orthodox," according to various estimates, constitute a significant minority in the demographic makeup of many current Modern Orthodox and Haredi communities. Perhaps 10-30

[2] Equally superficial, sanctimonious and ambiguous is the term "religious," facilely equated with "Orthodox." Doing certain obligatory acts does not make you *religious*, does not indicate the depth of your faith; I know plenty of Reform and Conservative Jews who may not strictly follow *halakhah* but are truly "religious." Orthodox does not necessarily mean "religious," does not automatically reflect one's relationship with the Creator, does not always mean that someone claiming that title behaves better or more in accord with what God desires. No more than someone calling himself "patriotic" is a more-fitting model of his country's putative ethos. An OTD individual may be "religious" – in a wider spiritual sense – in his or her own way.

[3] According to the 2020 Pew study, "Jewish Americans in 2020," 67 percent of U.S. adults raised as Orthodox Jews identified as Orthodox as adults, indicating a 33 percent "dropout" rate.

percent. And in some Haredi communities, according to anecdotal claims, losses from OTDs may outnumber the gains from *ba'alei teshuvah* joining their ranks. Rabbi Steven Pruzansky, a respected pulpit rabbi in New Jersey, a decade ago in an essay on ou.org, cited an unpublished study that found that 50% of the graduates of Modern Orthodox high schools within two years of graduation no longer observe Shabbat or *kashrut*, and that "25% of those graduates who attend secular colleges assimilate during college and completely abandon Torah and *mitzvot*."

No wonder there are so many empty seats at our Shabbat tables.

Our numbers aren't big enough to let so many people stray from our midst.

(For context: Ex-Orthodox who now affiliate with the LGBT community, people who often feel excluded from most of Orthodox life, represent a small percentage of the overall "ex" community, most studies have found. On the same hand, most people in the OTD community do not automatically identify as atheists.)

It's more than a few, isolated cases of Orthodox-raised young adult children who are now part of what we – pejoratively, judgmentally, dismissively, critically – call the Off The *Derekh* movement. As if there is *one derekh*, *one* correct path. And it's a shame, in the opinion of Orthodox thinkers who are increasingly recognizing and dealing with this phenomenon, and who consider it an indictment of how we are bringing up and educating our children – children who, by voting with their feet, indicate that they feel unable to find a place in most of the Orthodox community. Or to find acceptance as people who question the foundations of Jewish belief. Or to find a reason to stay.

Arguably, Orthodox dropouts are the price we pay, the risk we take, for living in a democracy – one that allows freedom of, and freedom from, religion.

Why is this exodus happening?

There are as many reasons as there are "dropouts":

- Because these men and women no longer believe in the truth of the Torah, the sanctity of the *mitzvot*, the Sinai-given obligation to follow the path of accepted *mesorah* that has guided the Jewish people for millennia. They literally have not kept the faith. *If "they" were standing at Sinai, what does that have to do with them three millennia later?*
- Because it doesn't make sense to them. It's not worth the effort. It's restrictive – certain jobs and classes are more enticing, more meaningful; dates, more attractive.
- Because abiding by the *taryag mitzvot,* in their opinion, does not make them a good Jew; many of them stay connected to Jewish life, in other, less-"religious," more-autonomous ways.

- Because they don't see (a demanding) God as a major part in their lives.
- Because… why search for a reason, or reasons, why our best and brightest find no *emet* in Torah? They may not have extensively thought out the *whys* for their lifestyle changes; Judaism, at least as carried out by their parents and still-*frum* siblings, simply does not mean as much to them as it once did.

In other words, they do not see a life-defining purpose in the *shalls* and *shall-nots* of Yiddishkeit. Why worry about leaving work early in the winter on a Friday afternoon, to get home before sundown, then hurrying to shul if your heart isn't in it? Why count the hours between a meat meal and a dairy snack if you don't really care about it? Why turn down that meal with non-Jewish co-workers at a non-kosher restaurant, or that movie on Shabbat, or a job or college major, if you see no reason to cite your religion as a reason for your reticence? Why… the list goes on. Does God care? Does He use a stopwatch? Does God measure the length of a woman's skirt or the dimensions of a man's *tzitzit*?

Why leave Orthodox Judaism? Why not? *What is it adding to their lives?*

Do the young men and women second-guess their choices, or feel ashamed of their decision to opt out? In general, no. They think, on balance, that they are gaining, not losing, by cutting their ties with the lifestyle their parents embraced. They're not leaving the Orthodox community out of spite or anger, but out of religious ennui and boredom – they're tired of pretending that details of *Shulhan Arukh* are important to them.

And their parents – at least those I know – in general don't make them feel ashamed. The parents practice the type of unconditional acceptance (of their children, while not necessarily of their children's choices) that is most likely to make their children feel welcome to return to the fold and to their Shabbat tables. These parents, while not driving their progeny away from Orthodox Judaism, are leaving the door open for them to come back.

One mark of demographic commonality: most of the parents in my circle of friends who have experienced a child turning away from Orthodoxy are liberal-minded, non-dogmatic people. Mostly BTs. Parents who at some point in their lives had turned away *from their parents'* secular (or at least non-Orthodox) lifestyle. The result: two successive generations of Jewish children breaking from the way they were raised.

Are we losing the cream of our young crop – the young people who, as Judaism has traditionally urged, are not afraid to question the foundations of our (i.e., *their*) faith? Or are they, as the sour-grapes cynics might assert, the fringe people whose losses we can most easily absorb?

The answer depends on who is giving it – whether individuals who consider any *neshamah* who chooses to leave to be a net loss for *Klal* Yi*srael*; or those who would automatically downplay the

intrinsic worth of the men and women who choose to disassociate from an Orthodox life.

Who are we to judge?

To expand my thinking on this subject, I turned to several friends in the Orthodox community, many of them from BT backgrounds, some of them with children who are no longer Orthodox. Their answers influenced me to approach the "OTD" phenomenon from a different angle – from the perspective of the young people themselves, rather than of their parents or the larger Jewish community and its institutions.

The Wrong Questions?

I'm asking the wrong questions, looking at this subject entirely incorrectly, misunderstanding the historical and psychological context of people leaving Orthodox Judaism, some of my friends advised me.

One friend whom I met in *yeshiva* some four decades ago, a BT who made aliyah and works for an Orthodox organization in Israel, called my questions "a complete mistake. I think the approach – [asking] 'what did we do wrong in our home, or how could the school have been better, or how can we prevent this?' – is a fool's quest."

The movement of young Jews away from their Orthodox upbringing "ain't new," he said …
This is not a uniquely contemporary phenomenon – as long as there have been Jews and Torah, some of the former have left the latter (consider the man in the Sinai wilderness stoned for collecting sticks on Shabbat).

The historical record shows that in earlier generations Jews for centuries left the Orthodox cocoon – to escape persecution, to advance socially and economically, to marry outside the faith, to deal with philosophical questions they regarded as unanswered by Judaism, to join movements like Socialism and Communism, to escape the psychological confines of the Jewish ghetto – mainly because the demands and the culture of Orthodox Judaism seemed irrelevant to them.

Jewish history records Jews leaving their community of birth to convert, assimilate, or find fulfillment in such things as sex and drugs. Bottom line: the children now are embracing what their parents had rejected.

"What about the thousands of Orthodox families in America in the 30's and 40's who had not one observant child?" my friend – the offspring of the generation of immigrants who reportedly threw their *tefillin* in the harbor when they reached New York City – asked.

In short: today's "OTD" are not an anomaly.

"As if to say," my friend added, "if we did it right, everyone would stay observant.

"I find these discussions wrong," he said. Why?

"Choice. Plain and simple. The Torah has profound and dramatic demands – belief in God, belief in the Torah being Divine, [the belief] that we are bound by *mitzvot*. Many people do not believe those things. Plain and simple. And rather than being untrue to themselves, they demand that they be true to themselves and not keep *mitzvot*."

Can anyone be blamed?

Our fault or their fault?

Or nobody's fault?

What I am describing , the "drop-out" situation among (nominally) Orthodox Jews, is the normal attrition rate in a free society (i.e., in the States and in Israel), and in a religion that is imbued with the alternative of free choice, says my friend – raised in the Reform movement, he later studied at a prominent BT *yeshiva*, and now is an Orthodox rabbi.

My friend knows whereof he speaks. His oldest daughter "is no longer observant. Does not keep Shabbat or kosher." Which he accepts. Not happily, of course, but resignedly. "We mouth the words that every soul is unique – well, if that is true, then we should not wonder why people choose a different path… we should assume that some will. Across all religions and denominations, you can predict that a certain percentage [will], regardless of how good the education and upbringing is. A certain percentage will simply make other choices."

My friend's respectful conclusion: I'm missing the big picture. "The success today in the Orthodox world of 80 percent-plus retention [his estimate] is the story."

By condemning people for exercising the right to determine how they decide to lead their spiritual lives, we are employing a double standard, he told me, echoing the opinion of other thinkers in the Orthodox world. While we laud the generation of BTs for using their *bechirah,* their God-given free choice, to take on the commandments that were given at Sinai, we condemn their children for going in the opposite direction.

"Even those who list themselves as 'Nones' [identifying with no religion] are generally not devoid of spiritual aspirations," Rabbi Angel wrote on his jewishideas.org website – they simply nourish their aspirations in a non-"Orthodox" way. "Among highly educated individuals whose minds have been shaped by secular universities and culture, there is surely a greater emphasis on self-reliance and individualism," Rabbi Angel wrote. "They simply are not finding that their spiritual aspirations are being fulfilled within 'establishment' religious contexts."

An Insider's Perspective

One of the people I approached, whom I have known since he was young, was Max Lenik, a project manager in the museum world in Chicago who was raised in an Orthodox family (both parents, notably, are *ba'alei teshuvah*) in New York State's Rockland County, and has counted himself

among the ranks of the formerly Orthodox for more than a decade. He documented his spiritual journey, and that of fellow travelers, from *frumkeit* – "non-observant and non-believing" – in his college thesis.[4]

Lenik's thesis was based on interviews he conducted with people in his friendship circles who were "in the process of leaving Orthodox Judaism." His writing indicates little struggle with shedding one's old identity, or few strategies for adapting to a new environment – just a natural process of moving from one world to another, and mutual support of one another. Most of the people he interviewed were also the children of BT parents, he explained in the introduction to his thesis, which he wrote because he wanted to put his own life decisions into a wider context and explain the thinking that went into his peer group's decisions. "I realized that I had subconsciously surrounded myself with friends of a similar mindset… I realized I was far from alone."

In his thesis, Lenik describes a divorce from Orthodox life that begins with a gradual separation, a "gradual letting go of certain observances and the slow drift towards a more lenient religious approach and possibly a life with no religion at all." Not out of bitterness or blaming one's parents, but out of a sense that their parents' theological priorities mean little, or nothing, to the children. "These ex-Orthodox Jews find themselves in a very ambivalent gray area. Some choose to lose their religious identity completely, others keep some aspect of the religion and leave others behind, and some choose to take on Judaism as more of a cultural identity only and not as a practiced religion at all.

"The two processes of exiting one culture and entering another overlap, creating a cognitive and theological dissonance within these young men that, more often than not, leaves them unsure of where they are headed," Lenik wrote. "The parents maintain that [original] *ba'al teshuvah* enthusiasm while their children experience the more passive emotions towards religious practices of the [previous generation's] *frum* from birth demographic." While the children "want religious autonomy," their parents "and communities want conformity." And, citing another expert's findings: "These youth felt that simply being religious due to habit was not enough for them and that being religious, while it really wasn't diminishing their quality of life, it wasn't adding anything to it either."

In other words, while they didn't want their grandfathers' religion, they also did not want their fathers'. Or any.

Lenik, 30ish, says he prefers the term "non-practicing" over OTD; and he finds the description of "OTD" people as "at risk" to be "definitely

[4] "The Dissonance Within: The Struggles and Life Strategies of Young, Ex-Orthodox Jewish Men," while an undergraduate anthropology major at Purchase College in Westchester County, New York, 2013.

offensive."

He seriously questioned his relationship with Orthodox Judaism by the time he spent his post-high school gap year at a *yeshiva* in Israel, but "I had my doubts prior to that. I just felt really fake" while going through the motions of observance, repeating the same words of prayer every day, accepting claims about the uniqueness of Judaism as the sole source of truth, and about the shortcomings of non-Orthodox branches of the religion. "I never felt connected" to the demands or exclusivist culture of the Orthodox community.

Now he calls himself "agnostic more than anything." He says he and his wife, who was raised, and still identifies as, Conservative, will raise their children – one already, a second one on the way – in "the Conservative pipeline": Solomon Schechter Day School, attendance at Conservative synagogues. Their home: "not 100% kosher." His wife lights Shabbat candles most weeks; they will conduct a Shabbat meal most Friday evenings.

They, Lenik says, are following a "comfortable" path within Judaism. As his parents have.

Rabbi Ron Yitzchok Eisenman of Passaic, N.J., a community populated by many *ba'alei teshuvah*, concurs. His speculation: "Kids in essence [are] following their parents' own model, namely, the parents changed the life they were brought up in, and now their children do the same."

Statistics and several interviews back up this assertion – that BT mothers and fathers are disproportionately represented among the Orthodox parents whose children shed an Orthodox lifestyle as they grow older.[5]

According to most statistical research and anecdotal reports, people who have come to identify as ex-Orthodox typically began to have doubts about the Orthodox belief – and normative behavior – system beginning in, or by, their early teens. A time when many adolescents examine what they think and how they act. In other words, though these young Jews' bodies were in the Orthodox community, their hearts weren't. In other words, they had already begun to emotionally step away from the milieu in which they were raised. In other words, the formal, physical step to leave their hometowns and their accustomed way of living did not mark a major departure from how they already regarded themselves.

Maybe that's the price that BT parents pay for telling their children how *they* were raised (non-Orthodox) and what they became (now-Orthodox) – a certain percentage of young Jews are likely to do what their parents did: deviate from their parents' path. *You picked your religious path – why can't I pick mine?"*

In much of the Orthodox *velt,* hand-wringing

[5] These findings are according to a 2016 study by Nishma Research, "Starting a Conversation: A Pioneering Survey of those who Have Left the Orthodox Community." A 2019 Nishma study, "The Journeys and Experience of Ba'alei Teshuvah," reported similar statistics.

about the "drop-outs" is often accompanied by opprobrium. Often, knee-jerk, undeserved condemnation; as if people who have turned away from our interpretation of Torah have automatically turned to drink and drugs and unbridled sexual satisfaction, a wanton life of no limits. As if the entire non-*frum* world finds escape in controlled substances and warm bodies. An essay a decade ago on the matzav.com website about the Footsteps organization that eases an OTD's path into the non-Orthodox world was illustrated by a large photograph of a young man slumped against a bare wall, his hands folded over his head, a forlorn look on his face. There was no caption on the photo, but the tacit message was that someone who had ostensibly left the Torah world was physically alone and spiritually lost.[6]

Which is not necessarily the case. Many – if not most – of these young men and women who no longer travel in our circles are emotionally and psychologically healthy, with thriving careers and well-adjusted friends. And they're not bitter.[7]

If they weren't eating cheeseburgers, we would with pride claim them as our own.

But their values, to varying degrees, aren't our values. Ditto for their lifestyle choices.

I know these children. I have seen them grow up. They're largely nice kids, polite, sensitive, educated – smart enough to make their theological choices based on an insider's knowledge of the Torah world, and of an acquired knowledge of the once-foreign secular world. They're not shooting up, hooking up, or engaging in modes of destructive behavior. They are not criminals. They have simply taken up a law-abiding, secular way of life that does not condemn eating *treif* or turning on a television on Shabbat; a way of life that simply offers more opportunities and more fulfillment than actions bounded by the *Mishnah Berurah*. *Frumkeit* simply does not make sense to them.

Today, judging by the drop-outs' own words, they are not running *to* anything; they're simply walking away *from* a lifestyle they don't find attractive or relevant. The demands and expectations of *kabbalat HaTorah* are simply not worth the effort.

While the leaving-the-fold phenomenon is noticeable in both the Modern Orthodox and Haredi communities, anecdotal evidence disagrees whether it is more prevalent among the former, whose higher education and familiarity with the language and high-tech/social media

[6] Besides Footsteps, other organizations that ease people's entry into the non-Orthodox world include Out for Change (*Yotzim LeShinuy*), Hillel, and Otot, in Israel; and Freidom (online), and Project Makom, founded by Allison Josephs of "Jew in the City," which works to help "former and questioning Charedi Jews" find the beauty in Orthodoxy, in the United States.

[7] https://matzav.com/deciphering-off-the-derech-understanding-the-language-of-footsteps/

practices of the outside world make the way seamless; or among the latter, who find the distinctive dress and highly prescribed way of life intolerable once they begin questioning the foundations of their faith.

Which, in total, the *frum* community would agree, is a loss to our numerical and spiritual strength, as well as to the men and women who have loosened their ties to the Orthodox part of it.

Like Their Parents – But in Reverse

Making the reverse trip from their BT parents, the children don't feel the attraction that *Abba* and *Imma* had in changing their lives to ones in accordance with ancient texts and eternal ideals. Like their parents, they found that their deviance from what they had learned at home and in school had a consequence – parental and communal disapproval.

Another, non-Jewish – but often-misunderstood – religion, offers a related precedent: Rumspringa ("running around"), in the Amish community. It is best-known for reports of young Amish adults acting "wild," in ways not usually associated with the conservative Christian sect.

There is a difference between the OTD phenomenon and the Rumspringa "coming of age" practice, in which some Amish participate when they reach their mid- or late-teens, a time when they are free to explore aspects of non-Amish behavior and folkways, and to decide whether they want to officially stay in the Amish community, be baptized, and accept all Amish regulations and stringencies (the *Ordnung*). Remaining obediently Amish is strictly voluntary; there is no official penalty, no coercion, no communal shunning, for declining to accept baptism and stay in the church – yet relations with some individual families may not remain close. But someone who *does* join, then drops out, *is* shunned.

According to the amishrules.com website, "85%-90%" percent of Amish youth who go through Rumspringa remain Amish. The teens, who grew up Amish, opt for what is familiar, and raise subsequent generations of young Amish who enter the Rumspringa period and emerge as Amish adults.

Which suggests that Amish teens remain with what they know best.

In terms of the Jewish community, an upbringing in a *frum* home is no guarantee that all the kids will continue on the path of Torah observance – Esau's parents, we remind ourselves, were Isaac and Rikvah. You don't get better *yichus* than that.

Schneur Zalman Newfield, an assistant professor of sociology at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, who was raised in the Chabad-Lubavitch hasidic community of Crown

Heights, Brooklyn, but now says he leads "a secular life," offers some words of optimism about men and women who have left Orthodox Judaism. They have not *completely* left their Orthodox upbringings behind, he says.[8]

Newfield, author of *Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation while Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism* (Temple University Press, 2020), based on interviews with 74 young formerly-Lubavitch and formerly-Satmar Jews, says, "important elements of their upbringing… stayed with them even years after leaving. My research challenges the basic notion that exiters ever 'complete' the process of exiting. None of them are completely free of their past." He calls these people, who continue to have a foot in their old, Orthodox, world, "hybrids."

But they continue on their terms, not their parents'.

While Yeshiva University, the flagship institution of the Modern Orthodox movement, has conducted extensive, nonjudgmental research on this subject, a prominent hasidic (i.e., Haredi) group in Israel is, surprisingly, leading the way in advocating the principle of radical acceptance. Rabbi Yissachar Dov Rokeach, Israeli-based rebbe of the Belzer Hasidim, in 2023 founded an organization he calls Ahavat Kadumim (ancient love).

The organization – unusual in the Haredi community for recommending embracement, rather than condemnation, of its youth who have left its ranks, left the faith but want to be emotionally and physically supported – focuses on keeping "straying" members close to their families and to the still-hasidic community, "with no intention of persuading them to return" to hasidic life, according to a report on matzav.com. *Welcoming,* not *kiruv.*

"They studied in hasidic institutions throughout their lives," a Belz hasid close to the rebbe was quoted by matzav.com as saying, "and even though they decided not to observe Torah and *mitzvot*, we must continue to care for them and embrace them unconditionally."

"The intention is not to bring them back to Judaism," The Jew in the City website reported. "The program is being built solely to support [the former members of the Orthodox community] through any sort of emotional distress they're

[8] Similarly, Moshe Krakowski, director of doctoral studies at Yeshiva University's Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education, says a 2025 OU survey conducted under his auspices, "Attrition and Connection in American Orthodox Judaism," of people who have left Orthodox Judaism, found that many of the surveyed individuals said they remain connected to the Orthodox community. "Many of the people we spoke with were not alienated or angry," he said. "Many … may want to continue to participate in some capacity.

"Most of the respondents overwhelmingly still had very positive feeling towards the Orthodox Jewish community even while sometimes also having very negative feelings," Krakowski said. "Out-and-out hatred or feeling that the Orthodox Jewish community is wrong or bad was really, really tiny."

experiencing, to give them pure love and care for exactly who they are."

According to matzav.com, the rebbe reportedly took this step after the suicide of a 23-year-old former Belzer hasid who had been rejected by his family. "The young man's suicide deeply affected the Belzer *kehillah.*"

An initiative like Ahavat Kadumim is a sign of de facto recognition of the value of a practice such as Rumspringa.

Another example: Rabbi Menachaem Bombach, an educator who serves as a spokesman for Israel's "progressive Haredi community," in a Times of Israel blog, "Thou Shalt Love your Child who Leaves Religion," wrote about his relationship with his adult daughter. She is no longer Orthodox. The rabbi described shopping with her in a Jerusalem mall; she was wearing jeans. People stared at father and daughter. For one "ultra-Orthodox couple," the Bombachs "seemed to have become their favorite place in the mall."

The rabbi's daughter asked if he was embarrassed "by the looks that were relentlessly cast" at him.

"Even if I am," Rabbi Bombach, who serves as founder and CEO of the Netzach Educational Network, answered, "you are my daughter, and I love you, and you are more important to me than anything else in the world."

The rabbi's advice:

- "Pay no attention to the small-minded people who gossip and judge you behind your back."
- "Be honest with yourself and ask yourself what bothers you more – that your child has left religion or that your child no longer abides by the external trappings of the community's dress code."
- The fact that great Torah leaders in the past had children "who left observance… did not diminish the greatness of these scholars."
- "Just as God accepts us despite our weaknesses, so too we must accept our children in their new ways of life."

What is our communal response to this growing phenomenon? It depends on our attitude: Do we regard dropouts as a problem, as a failure, as a reflection on our children and on us, or as an inexorable fact of Jewish life as old as the biblical Patriarchs who had children who did not stay on the Jewish path, and of latter-day rabbinic figures who had children who did not stay Orthodox as adults?

Rabbi Bombach cited a story well-known in Orthodox circles: the father of a daughter who was no longer "religious" and dressed immodestly asked Rabbi Aharon Yehuda Leib Shteinman, a respected leader of the *yeshivish* wing of Orthodox Judaism in Israel, if the girl should be banished from the family's home, lest she influence the other children. Answered Rabbi Shteinman, "You may send away the other

brothers and sisters, but this daughter must be allowed to remain at home at all costs. She is the one who needs your love more than all the others."

Some Dos and Don'ts

In short, the decision for some people to turn away from Orthodox Judaism is *their* responsibility – not their parents' or teachers'. But for whatever role the adults play in shaping the children's spiritual future, here is some advice culled from various reports on the OTD topic:

- Don't say no if your child requests a compromise or accommodation that does not blatantly transgress *halakhah*. Inordinate inflexibility is likely to turn the child away.
- Don't automatically condemn or criticize. That may be what turned him or her off in the first place.
- Emphasize what part of your – or your child's – observance is important. Not every *mitzvah* or *minhag* is of equal spiritual value.
- Give them time. His or her beliefs or behavior at 16 may not be the child's feelings about Judaism at 26.
- Focus on what your child *likes* about Judaism. That's something to build on.
- Pick your battles. *Is every offense to your way of doing things worth a fight?*
- Emphasize modeling, not coercion. Show, don't tell, what a child should be doing.
- Accept half a loaf; accept what your child *is* doing. That will make your child more willing to listen.
- Look at yourselves, not at them. First, ask yourself why your child is acting in a way of which you do not approve.
- Don't worry about the OTD child's effect on other children's possible *shidduchim*. If you do, it sends the message that the other kids are more important, more valuable to you.
- Don't be surprised by your child's attitude. *Did you ever deviate from your parents' expectations?*
- Listen. Don't immediately react to every criticism of Orthodox customs.
- Acknowledge and validate your children's concerns. Even if their criticisms are not true, they are your child's reality.
- Don't blame yourself for the choices that your child, at this stage an adolescent or young adult, makes. *Isaac and Yaakov also erred* (*overlooking one child's shortcomings, and favoring one son over his brothers, respectively*). *Are you more holy than the Avot?*
- Pay no attention to outsiders who criticize you or your child. *Did they raise your child?*

An Orthodox rabbi friend of mine, product of a strictly Haredi education, says he asks one question if a congregant or some other member of his community approaches him about taking on a *humra* or accepting a strict interpretation of observance: "Will that bring you closer to God?"

Not, “What does the *Shulhan Arukh* say?”

This is a good guideline – put your child’s relationship with the Creator at the forefront of your reaction to his or her behavior.

While logic dictates that belief determines action, Jewish tradition strongly suggests that action can shape belief – opening up an “OTD” individual to the beauty of Judaism, but not *forcing* him or her to take part in a Jewish activity, can influence the person to return; i.e., show, don’t tell. And don’t demand.

Sara Devora Chrysler, a Jewish educator and author in Manchester, England, in an email conversation with the author, said that the growing number of drop-outs from an Orthodox lifestyle can be traced to parents and fellow educators who fail to do this, who do not provide enviable and emulateable role models of translating Jewish beliefs into Jewish actions, who do not demonstrate the *kedushah* in even the smallest Jewish act. The fault, she said, is “not allowing authenticity“ to color everything they do, not making “Hashem's planning of a destiny” central to the way children are taught about what being Jewish means.

In other words, if the place of God in raising and educating a Jewish child does not trump the dos and don’ts, a child is more likely to find the *why be Jewish* missing.

In other words, if our main concern is what the children who become former Orthodox Jews are doing, or *not* doing, and not the faith that is supposed to motivate them, we are missing the point of a Jewish life.

In other words, we are not sharing why we stood at Sinai.

In other words, as Chrysler said, God is not often present – to an adequate degree, at least – in the Jewish classroom.

Or at the Shabbat table.

Book Review: Rav Yehuda Henkin’s Responsa on Contemporary Jewish Women’s Issues (Expanded Edition)

Dena (Freundlich) Rock teaches Gemara and Halacha at Midreshet Lindenbaum in Jerusalem.

Rav Yehuda Herzl Henkin (1945–2020) was one of the most highly regarded poskim of the Modern Orthodox and Dati Leumi worlds in the last half century. He authored four volumes of *teshuvot*, entitled *Shu"t Bnei Banim*, published between 1981 and 2004. He was notably sensitive to women’s concerns, and approximately one-third of his responsa address issues relating to women and halacha. In 2003, Rav Henkin himself published a volume of English translations of many of his *teshuvot* relating specifically to women. Rav Henkin passed away in 2020, and

now, in 2025, his widow, Rabbanit Chana Henkin—an accomplished Torah scholar in her own right[1]—has published an expanded version that includes translations of seven additional *teshuvot* addressing topics such as women's Megilla readings and hair covering.

Teshuvot (responsa) comprise a unique genre that offers a window into the mind of the posek, allowing readers to observe how a halachic decisor identifies relevant sources, analyzes them, and applies them judiciously to the question at hand. Very few responsa are accessible to the English-speaking public, which makes this volume an invaluable contribution that breaks new ground for those who cannot access Hebrew *teshuvot.* Furthermore, its focus on women's issues renders it indispensable for English speakers who seek to understand these relevant, complex, and often contentious areas of halacha.

A striking example of the insight that *teshuvot* provide into a posek's thinking appears in Rav Henkin's treatment of women and *zimun*. In Chapter 7, Rav Henkin argues that a man may lead a women's *zimun*. Then, in Chapter 8, he writes: "Regarding what I wrote previously [(Chapter 7, above)] that a man who dined with three women may lead *zimun* for them, I now see that the *gaon* R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z"l disagreed, and one must weigh his opinion."[2] Rav Henkin then thoroughly and respectfully analyzes Rav Shlomo Zalman's view, concluding: "Nevertheless, my conclusion stands regarding *zimun* led by a man who dined together with three women." This exchange provides a valuable glimpse into how *poskim* process new information, refine earlier positions, and balance humility with principled confidence.

Rav Henkin's sensitivity to women is evident throughout the *teshuvot.* For example, in one responsum he addresses how a *sheliach tzibbur* should handle the blessing of *she'lo asani ishah*.[3] He explores numerous possibilities, accepting some and rejecting others,[4] yet never entertains the idea of simply telling women they should not be offended—a striking display of empathy and understanding.

Another powerful example appears in his *teshuva* on mixed seating at weddings. He describes a practice according to which the bride ate in a separate room during *Sheva Brachot* meals and

[1] Rabbanit Henkin founded Nishmat, co-founded its Yoatzot Halacha program, and headed its Beit Midrash for over 30 years, now serving as Chancellor and heading its research division, The Henkin Institute.

[2] Rabbi Yehuda Henkin, *Responsa on Contemporary Jewish Women's Issues: New Expanded Edition* (Ktav, 2025),52.

[3] *Shacharit* services begin with a series of blessings in which we thank God for a variety of His daily gifts to us, such as our eyesight, our clothing, and our ability to stand up straight. One of these blessings, recited by men only, is *Blessed are You, Hashem, our God, King of the World, that You did not make me a woman.* Many women are understandably offended by this.

[4] Ultimately, the two solutions he promotes are either for the *sheliach tzibbur* to not say ANY *Birkot HaShahar* aloud but rather begin from "R' Yishmael says," or for him to say "*she'lo asani ishah"* quietly (33-34).

was only brought in for *Birkat HaMazon*. He recounts, "When *sheva brachot* were held at my grandfather's apartment on one of the nights after our wedding, the organizers seated my wife in a corner outside the dining room with a handful of women. I protested… My grandfather accepted my words but said that it is difficult to contest an established practice, but I think anyone who is able to should protest." Given Rav Henkin's profound admiration for his grandfather,[5] his willingness to disagree—both in the moment and in writing—in deference to women's dignity is remarkable.

A final example of unique sensitivity to women appears in Rav Henkin's teshuva on adding the mothers' names when referring to the *chattan* and *kallah* in the *ketuba*—a responsum I was privileged to learn in person with Rabbanit Henkin and a group of my Lindenbaum students. Rav Henkin writes, "I don't see a reason to prohibit writing the mother's name in the *ketuba*," and proceeds to explain his reasoning, including that doing so does not violate *chukot hagoyim*[6] since "inclusion of a mother's name is not irrational, coming as it does to give honor to both parents."[7]

Rav Henkin is also fearless and forthright. He opens his *teshuva* on *Talit for Women*[8] by stating clearly: "A woman may wear *tzitzit* in private or under her outer clothes, for then there is no suspicion that she wishes to appear like a man."[9] Similarly, he writes on 106: "A woman can certainly read the *ketubah* and/or give a Dvar Torah under the *chuppah*." Many *poskim* would not be willing to issue such rulings, let alone put them in writing. Rav Henkin not only did so—he chose to include these *teshuvot* in the English edition, ensuring they would reach an even wider audience.

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[5] Rav Yehuda Henkin quotes his grandfather, Rav Yosef Eliahu Henkin, numerous times throughout his *teshuvot*. See, for example, 34, regarding the bracha of *shelo asani isha*; 71 footnote 5 regarding his grandfather's preference for the Aruch HaShulchan over the Mishnah Berurah; 92, 106, and 154 regarding women reciting Kaddish; and 240 regarding contraception (see also footnote 1 there for a fascinating debate between his grandfather and Rav Moshe Feinstein regarding Reform and Conservative marriages).
In the Foreword to the Expanded Edition (xii), Rabbanit Chana Henkin writes:

> "The formative religious influence in Rav Henkin's life, from childhood onward, was his saintly grandfather, the Gaon Rav Yosef Eliahu Henkin *ztz"l*. My husband was a graduate student at Columbia University when he said one day, "My grandfather will not live forever." By the following day, he had left the university to live beside his grandfather and learn with him daily, morning and evening, for five years".

[6] Vaykira 18:3 states: *You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, nor shall you copy the practices of the land of Canaan to which I am bringing you, and you shall not follow their statutes (u'be'hukoteihem lo teileikhu).* This is understood as prohibiting any action or activity that non-Jews do that does not have a rational basis (see Tosafot to Avodah Zarah 11a, s.v. *"V'ee chuka"* and the Shulchan Aruch/Rama, Yoreh De'ah 178:1).

[7] 217.

[8] Chapter 4.

[9] 35.

Many of the *teshuvot* in this volume also demonstrate Rav Henkin's creativity. For example, in his teshuva on Torah study for women (Chapter 1), one of his arguments for permitting the teaching of *Torah She'be'al Peh* (Oral Law) to women is that "When the Talmud became fixed in writing it acquired the status of Written Law" (16). In other words, he suggests that once the Talmud was written down, it took on the halachic status of *Torah She'bichtav*, and thus is no more problematic to teach to women than Humash.

Translating responsa into English presents a unique challenge. On the one hand, the intended audience consists largely of readers who are not fluent enough in Hebrew to study the *teshuvot* in their original language, and thus are likely not familiar with the sources upon which the *teshuvot* are based nor with the *teshuvot*'s background assumptions.[10] On the other hand, responsa are not designed as comprehensive presentations of a topic. They are the *posek*'s specific analysis of a particular question, and typically assume prior familiarity with the broader halachic landscape. As a result, readers should be aware that there are sometimes additional sources, issues, or angles that Rav Henkin does not address. For example, in his *teshuva* on *Talit for Women* (35–36), he discusses only the concern of *begged ish*, the prohibition against wearing clothing of the opposite gender. This responsum does not even mention *mechzei ke'yuhara*, the concern that visibly excessive stringency might come across as signaling an air of religious superiority—a central issue in many discussions of this topic, and the reason given by the Rama[11] for discouraging women from wearing *tzitzit*.

Similarly, *teshuvot* often omit background information. In this volume, for example, Rav Henkin presents three different responsa on women and *zimun*—women's *zimun* when men are present (Chapter 6), whether a man can lead a women's *zimun* (Chapter 7), and the wording of women's *zimun* (Chapter 8). Each focuses on its narrow question without first reviewing the relevant background, such as the nature and source of *zimun*, the halachic status of three women who eat together, or the relationship between the obligation in *Birkat HaMazon* and the ability to lead a *zimun*. This approach is entirely appropriate for *teshuvot,* but readers who are not familiar with the relevant background before reading Rav Henkin's responsa may find themselves disoriented.[12]

[10] Rav Henkin himself explicitly acknowledged this when he explained in his Foreword to the original volume that he was omitting some of the citations that are included in the original Hebrew *teshuvot* "on the assumption that those who read *teshuvot* in translation are unlikely to look up the Hebrew sources" (xi in the original volume; reprinted as the Preface in the Expanded Edition, xvii).

[11] Orach Chayim 17:2.

[12] Another example is that in Chapter 5, Rav Henkin asserts that women are obligated to say *Shemoneh Esrei* every day, arguing that even the Rambam agrees to this. Those unfamiliar with the relevant Gemara (Berachot 20b) and Rambam (Hilchot Tefila 1:1-2) would not appreciate the nuance and significance of making this claim.

Readers of this volume might benefit from first seeking out background materials on each topic in preparation for learning the responsa. This will enable them to more fully understand Rav Henkin's *teshuvot* and to recognize when he offers novel approaches or original interpretations.[13]

These *teshuvot* are worth investing effort to appreciate. They offer English speakers access to the world of *teshuvot*, and to a fearless, principled, and creative *posek* who addressed halachic questions surrounding women and halacha with sensitivity, empathy, and wisdom.

[13] One highly recommended resource is Deracheha.org, a website directed by Rav Henkin's student of many years, Rabbanit Laurie Novick, under the auspices of Yeshivat Har Etzion. Deracheha offers organized, comprehensive overviews of topics related to women and *halacha*, including all the sources in their original Hebrew with accompanying English translation, in many cases, unpacking and analyzing Rav Henkin's arguments.